

Researcher says hate 'fringe' isn't as crowded as claimed

Accuses activists of exaggerating danger of extremists

By Robert Stacy McCain
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They collect millions of dollars for their crusades against hate groups, but do so-called "watchdog" organizations exaggerate the dangers posed by neo-Nazis and other racist movements?

Laird Wilcox thinks so. A Kansas author and editor who has spent decades researching what he calls "fringe" groups, Mr. Wilcox says the total numbers of active, organized extremists on the right is not much more than 10,000.

"Because of their nature, it's very difficult to come up with firm numbers" for such groups, Mr. Wilcox says, but estimates "the militias are probably 5,000 or 6,000 people. The Ku Klux Klan are down to about 3,000 people. And the combined membership of all neo-Nazi groups are probably just 1,500 to 2,000."

In a nation of more than 270 million people, the small size of such fringe groups represents a tiny danger, yet they are the target of what Mr. Wilcox calls an "industry" of watchdog groups.

"There is an anti-racist industry entrenched in the United States that has attracted bullying, moralizing fanatics, whose identity and livelihood depend upon growth and expansion of their particular kind of victimization," Mr. Wilcox wrote in his 1999 book "The Watchdogs."

Naming such organizations as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), based in Montgomery, Ala., Mr. Wilcox claims "the anti-racist movement has become a massive extortion racket."

The SPLC, founded in 1971, has amassed an endowment of \$113 million through the efforts of co-founder Morris Dees, who served as finance director for Democratic Sen. George McGovern's 1972

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presidential campaign. According to the Atlanta Constitution, he "then used the campaign's donor list of 700,000 liberals for the law center."

The SPLC has consistently exaggerated the size and numbers of extremist groups, says Mr. Wilcox, who for more than 20 years has edited the "Guide to the American Right" (now in its 24th edition) and the "Guide to the American Left" (in its 21st edition), each of which lists hundreds of organizations.

In 1992, for instance, SPLC's Klanwatch division claimed there were "346 white-supremacy groups operating" in the United States. But, says Mr. Wilcox, "in terms of viable groups ... the actual figure is about 50."

Even when it recently announced that the number of hate groups had declined, the SPLC claimed "the reported decline in numbers of groups may be deceiving" in part because of a trend of consolidation in which "smaller groups disbanded or joined larger organizations."

SPLC spokesman Mark Potok said Mr. Wilcox has "had an ax to grind for a great many years. He spends his time attacking other people who do anti-racist work, calling them everything from Communists to opportunistic slime."

Mr. Wilcox's criticism has been "used by right-wing extremists very frequently as a vehicle to attack us," Mr. Potok said.

But Mr. Wilcox is not the only

critic of the SPLC. Former employees of the organization have called the SPLC "a joke" and "evil," and have called Mr. Dees "amoral." Former black employees have claimed they were discriminated against by the SPLC, according to press accounts.

The SPLC has also been criticized by left-wing writer Alexander Cockburn, who said Mr. Dees raised millions "by frightening elderly liberals that the heirs of Adolf Hitler are about to march down Main Street."

In "The Watchdogs," Mr. Wilcox chronicles several recent scandals involving anti-racist groups, including:

- The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which monitors anti-Semitism, was scandalized in 1993 when the FBI accused one of its paid investigators, Roy Bullock, of using confidential information from San Francisco police inspector Tom Gerard to compile computerized files on political groups.

- ADL espionage targets included such liberal groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, as well as labor unions and environmental groups. More recently, the ADL was the target of a lawsuit by a Colorado couple who accused the group of defaming them after an ADL official accused them of "anti-Semitic harassment." On April 28, a federal jury in Denver awarded the couple \$10.5 million in the suit.

- The Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), an Atlanta-based group begun in 1979 as the National Anti-Klan Network, sparked a national media uproar in 1996 by claiming "a well-organized white-supremacist movement" was responsible for an "epidemic" of arson attacks against black churches in the South.

Within months, journalists and law enforcement officials had concluded that church-burnings had



An explosive-detecting dog from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms takes a break in a grassy area as several agents search for evidence in debris of a 1996 church fire in Mississippi.

actually declined, that racism was a motive in less than half of the arsons, and that white churches were more often targeted by arsonists.

- Political Research Associates (PRA) is based in Cambridge, Mass. In 1992, the Rev. Francis S. Strykowski was forced to resign after PRA analyst Chip Berlet "conclusively identified" the 76-year-old Catholic priest as having attended a 1988 meeting of the "Anti-Communist Confederation of Polish Freedom Fighters."

A former Klan leader, Bob Miles, gave an anti-Semitic speech at the meeting in Salem, Mass., though Mr. Strykowski later claimed he "did not know ahead of time" about the nature of the meeting.

Mr. Berlet, who noted that he

has himself been critical of some anti-racist groups in the past, accused Mr. Wilcox of mischaracterizing PRA's activities.

"Laird Wilcox is not an accurate or ethical reporter," he said. "He simply can't tolerate people who are his competition in this field."

But Mr. Wilcox says what most watchdog groups have in common is a tendency to use what he calls "links and ties" to imply connections between individuals and groups.

"It's kind of like three Catholics hold up a bank in San Francisco, and you blame the pope," he said, citing the Oklahoma City bombing as an instance where the "links and ties" method was used to blame militia groups for the bombing.

"Militias had nothing to do with Oklahoma City, absolutely nothing," he said, citing the massive FBI investigation that turned up "absolutely no tangible link between [convicted bomber Timothy] McVeigh and any militia group."

The "links and ties" of anti-racist groups reveal their own political agendas, Mr. Wilcox says. In "The Watchdogs," he details how the Center for Democratic Renewal was an offshoot of the Communist Workers Party, a Maoist splinter of the 1960s "New Left"

It is not surprising that these groups use accusations of extremism, according to David Horowitz of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture.

"The extreme left ... needs the extreme right to justify its own agendas," says Mr. Horowitz, a former leftist who is now a popular conservative author. "That's the way it worked in the '60s."

Left-wing groups "exaggerate these dangers" from white supremacists, Mr. Horowitz said. "Who has more influence, David Duke or Louis Farrakhan?" he said, comparing the Louisiana ex-Klansman to the Nation of Islam leader, both of whom have frequently been accused of anti-Semitism.

Watchdog groups may actually help the hate groups they claim to oppose, says free-lance writer Jim Redden, by generating media coverage of extremists.

"My belief is that there aren't that many hard-core racist activists in this country," said Mr. Redden, who has covered the activities of extremists in the Pacific Northwest. "And ... even with their Internet sites, they're very limited in their ability to get their ideas before the public, so the mass media coverage of their movement does more to publicize their beliefs than

Culture, et cetera